

# The Expanding World Ayahuasca Diaspora

During its expansion from the Amazon jungle to Western societies, ayahuasca use has encountered different legal and cultural responses. Following on from the earlier edited collection, *The Expanding World Ayahuasca Diaspora* continues to explore how certain alternative global religious groups, shamanic tourism industries, and recreational drug milieus grounded in the consumption of the traditionally Amazonian psychoactive drink ayahuasca embody various challenges associated with modern societies.

Each contributor explores the symbolic effects of a “bureaucratization of enchantment” in religious practice and the “sanitizing” of indigenous rituals for tourist markets. Chapters include ethnographic investigations of ritual practice, transnational religious ideology, the politics of healing, and the invention of tradition. Larger questions on the commodification of ayahuasca and the categories of sacred and profane are also addressed.

Exploring classic and contemporary issues in social science and the humanities, this book provides rich material on the burgeoning expansion of ayahuasca use around the globe. As such, it will appeal to students and academics in religious studies, anthropology, sociology, psychology, cultural studies, biology, ecology, law, and conservation.

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*Edited by Beatriz Caiuby Labate and Clancy Cavnar*

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Appropriation, Integration  
and Legislation

**Edited by Beatriz Caiuby Labate  
and Clancy Cavnar**

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## Preface

This timely follow up to the first volume of *The World Ayahuasca Diaspora: Reinvention and Controversies* explores ayahuasca in the context of classic and contemporary issues in social sciences and the humanities, providing rich material on the burgeoning expansion of ayahuasca as it situates itself in various circumstances around the globe and reveals its tendency to connect and transform people, beings, networks and ideas. The challenges associated with alternative global religious groups, shamanic tourism industries, and recreational drug milieus, expand to the same degree that the brew itself spreads. In this collection, space is given to discussions on the global intercultural exchange of ayahuasca affecting indigenous modernization, political and moral dimensions of ritual healing, drug policy, religious persecution, public controversies, gender stereotypes, and dilemmas of integration into mainstream society. Ayahuasca's travels from the Amazon jungle to Western societies and back to the jungle has entailed encounters with different legal and cultural contexts; disparate and competing ideas on authenticity have emerged among ayahuasca drinkers and between them and the state, creating an international patchwork of laws and representations regarding ayahuasca, all deserving of detailed explorations, some of which are provided herein. Cultural appropriation and commodification of indigenous traditions are also highly germane as ayahuasca expands into new sectors of society; it is in this arena that some of the most charged discussions may be found. This book tackles these issues and more in an attempt to capture the arguments and proofs of some of the most qualified ongoing research in social sciences regarding the vine. The rapid rise of ayahuasca in the public imagination has created an urgent need for ethnographically sound and unbiased reports and analysis such as we hope is provided here in this second volume. We hope you enjoy reading it!

Beatriz Caiuby Labate and Clancy Cavnar

# Foreword

## **Ayahuasca and its controversies**

Before leaving its first home on the Upper Amazon, ayahuasca had spent a long time mediating between peoples, languages, and cultures, between different shamanic traditions, between the waking world and the world of visions. Between humans and spirits. It was a thread connecting something that no religion, no political power, had yet unified. This mediating power multiplied afterwards, when ayahuasca began to become popularized in urban environments and offered, through its visions, an immediate immersion in what had, until then, appeared insurmountably distant and wild.

The chapter that opens this volume (Labate and Assis) shows how far this embassy has reached: from the forest to the cities and the capitals, to the old and new metropolises, and to other poles of the global panorama. Ayahuasca has already become established throughout Latin America, in the United States, and Western Europe, and, more incipiently, in Eastern Europe, but also in South Africa, Australia, and Japan. As Conrad's chapter reminds us, this expansion is virtually coextensive and coeval with the growth of the Internet, which has played an important role in its diffusion. But although the Internet has been an instrument in the expansion of ayahuasca, it is also perhaps another allegory for it. Amazonian indigenous peoples – who, for decades, have freely compared ayahuasca with cinema and television – surely have no problem extending this analogy to the network of networks.

As with the Internet, this wide-ranging mediation cannot occur without the traversed borders becoming more sensitive and increasingly disputed. This book explores these controversies, and this foreword also addresses them, in dialogue with the rich collection of chapters offered up by the book, albeit without looking to summarize them – nor concur with them on all their points.

One of these controversies is probably the most extensive and decisive of the Western tradition; namely, the separation between culture and nature. Here, we are not talking about archaeology or about outmoded prejudices; this dividing line is one of the foundations of our legal systems, and traces,

for example, the difference between what can be a subject of intellectual property and what cannot, between what is no more than a plant and what constitutes an illegal drug.

These two issues have already given rise to polemics in the world of ayahuasca. Twenty years ago, the patenting of a *Banisteriopsis* plant provoked one of the biggest scandals in biopiracy, while the growing police repression of the trade in the components of ayahuasca has been based, as the article by Hobbs points out, on the degree of alteration through human manipulation. The nature/culture divide is worth exploring, since it succeeds in penalizing actions like drying and packing, or, more effectively, in criminalizing not the plant itself, but the information relating to it, seen as an incentive to drug use. The nature-culture divide is always like a border drawn in the middle of a metropolis: it serves more to create contraband than prevent it, and ayahuasca is a perfect example of this effect. Typically, its followers, like the judges, place it on the side of nature, thereby eclipsing the considerable human action needed for the activity of a set of plants and their combined possibilities to be known by humans.

Another issue concerns the difference between drug and food (Gearin and Labate). Many of the Amazonian uses of ayahuasca are subsumed under a more general framework of a shamanism of food and are conceived more as “purgés” or “diets” than as visionary experiences. The alimentary prescriptions and taboos that surround the use of ayahuasca form a continuum with those that govern the local norms of elaborating the body. For Pano peoples, for example, ayahuasca is included in a set of bitter substances, indispensable to the perfecting of the human body, but prejudicial to the beginnings of its formation; that is, for young infants and for women during pregnancy and while feeding. None of this necessarily presumes a contrast with the West, where a growing proportion of the population shows itself obsessed by the ethical implications of foods and their interpretation as either “medicines” or “poisons.” New users of ayahuasca frequently display much more concern with these interactions than the indigenous users for whom, to give one example, ayahuasca is often carefully separated from alcohol, yet is not infrequently taken to be its equivalent. Ayahuasca may form the center of a comprehensive health practice, or of a religious or speculative quest – without clear boundaries demarcating it from recreational use – and this applies indiscriminately to the entire global trajectory traced by ayahuasca.

The contrast between a primitive authenticity and New Age inventions has become of less and less interest. The professionals and amateurs of anthropology have little by little abandoned their belligerence against neo-shamanism. Sustaining a hostile stance had become difficult, since many intermediary forms – here we can think of Santo Daime or the UDV – had already acquired a patina of respect over time. Moreover, the subjects who supposedly represented the purest tradition – indigenous shamans – had been directly involved in openly hybrid ventures. Also, it is worth noting, in passing, the traditionalist prosopopoeia of neo-shamanism, with its

solemn ritualism and priestly attire, provides an insight into how little the indigenous shamanism of the past was “traditional” itself, as it was characterized by widespread borrowing and experimentation. We can no longer understand ayahuasca as simply an extension of Amazonian shamanism (in itself, a very risky generalization): it already has a field of its own, organized around very different techniques and cosmologies.

However, the fact that the tension between tradition and invention has lost its edge has not prevented the conflict from reappearing now in more pragmatic forms. The encounter between the ayahuasca of native Amazonians and more or less wealthy urbanites produces, after the initial euphoria, tensions that, as usual, tend to have more impact on the financially weaker pole. A local resource has become the object of foreign avidity, and what was a means of dealing with vital conflicts has turned into a way of life. From being a singular subject, often situated at the outer limit of alterity, the shaman has become the archetype of the indigenous person, an archetype that needs to be embodied as decisively as possible, since he or she faces competition from new protagonists, coming from all parts of the world to appropriate this role.

On the other hand, as Echazu and Carew note, the same clients, patients, or users who seek out the forest to escape the Euro-American conventions end up importing demands to regulate and control the use of ayahuasca and the relations between its actors. The moral ambiguity that pervades the original world of ayahuasca – a means of healing, but equally a means of aggression, including as a weapon of war – suddenly becomes caught up in a game in which all these ambiguities are no longer parts of the complexity of being, but elements of the penal code. Globalized ayahuasca has its discontents, just like globalization as a whole.

The case of Taita Orlando Gaitán, related by Caicedo, and his prosecution for sexual abuse provides a clear parable of the many equivocations and conflicts surrounding the globalization of ayahuasca, ranging from the management of indigenous identity to the transformation of the shaman into a businessman straddled between religion and the third sector (the NGOs), passing through the readjustment of shamanic codes to a new clientele, and through the blurred overlapping between the power of a leader and the power of the plant.

The chapters by Cavnar and Mesturini touch, in different ways, on another famous duality, the opposition between the individual and the collective: two aspirations that have both equally sought to drink from “primitive” sources. Ayahuasca originates from a world, Amazonia, that has been presented sometimes as a model of community life, sometimes as an anarchic refuge of personal freedom. Mesturini points to a peculiar virtue of ayahuasca that distances it from both these poles: the virtue of, despite its expansion, remaining entangled, propagating itself through networks, and creating them. The virtue of not transforming simply into a *substance*, into an *active principle*: the question is always ayahuasca and all the relations

that it involves, not DMT. This fact distinguishes ayahuasca from other psychoactives of Amerindian origin that seem more liable to become associated with individual experiences and their auto-referential metaphysic. Cavnar focuses, on the contrary, on the relationship between ayahuasca and the most definitive aspect of individuality today: sexual orientation and identity. For many users from the LGBT scene, the visionary experience – not the social context in which it takes place, for the most part highly orthodox in sexual matters – has played a valuable role in developing a positive perception of a sexual identity challenged by its surroundings.

Cavnar's chapter brings up another interesting dimension: ayahuasca's value in the affirmation of homosexuality contrasts with the use, decades ago, of psychedelic drugs (LSD) in order to try to "cure" it. The relation between psychoactives and gender models seems to be equally ambiguous: the chapters of this volume offer different, and even discordant, opinions on this point. Echazu and Carew criticize the masculine bias that has dominated New Age trends like Peruvian *vegetalismo* and highlight the frequent presence of female shamans in the indigenous world. In contrast, Mesturini observes that the neo-shamanisms have incorporated – unsurprisingly, given the public to which they are directed – a more egalitarian and even feminist conception of gender, including the assimilation of ayahuasca with feminine symbols or archetypes, altering a landscape previously dominated by a masculine ethos. Perhaps these two appraisals are not so incompatible as they first seem: what changes as we shift from one world to another is not so much the gender models but the status attributed to norm and transgression. Women can be shamans in one world, the indigenous world, where spiritual power is a matter of fact, not law. Shamanism is not a priesthood whose efficacy depends on institutional consecration. One can be a shaman despite not taking the usual paths to becoming a shaman: by stealing secrets, for example, or by inventing resources that regular transmission had denied. One can also become a shaman by eluding the male norm. Moreover, such abnormality is not always an impairment to shamanic capacity; in fact, it may heighten it, since the exceptional has powers of which the normal is unaware. In the new situation, women are granted something of this role that previously they seized for themselves, and this points, at the same time, to a kind of liberalization and a species of domestication.

The use of ayahuasca oscillates between a "religion" and being some antithesis of the latter. For a long time, the dualities of this series – religion versus sorcery, magic, superstition, and so on – served to stigmatize any practice not subjected to the frameworks of an institution. But recently, the poles have reversed, and terms like "spirituality" or "holistic therapy" have proven useful to sectors that, having abjured religion and its means, remain interested in what religion proposed as an end. The choice between "religion" and "spirituality" (and related terms) also has other consequences, of course. Depending on time and place, the assimilation of the use of ayahuasca with a religious practice can contribute to its legitimization or the

complete opposite. In Uruguay, as Scuro shows, ayahuasca has been careful to avoid becoming associated with religion, something undesirable in a country with a strongly secular tradition. Forming part of a religion is, on the contrary, what has helped legitimize ayahuasca in Brazil and the United States: countries with harsh anti-drug policies. The Irish case, presented in the chapter by Watt, is an interesting example because it unites the two poles. For a time, ayahuasca found a safe niche in its identification as a native variant of Catholicism. Santo Daime was none other than the Amazonian version of this alliance between the Christian message and the pre-Christian religious world that centuries earlier had also given rise to an Irish Catholicism impregnated with Celtic remnants. Ayahuasca was thus a new avatar of this deep-rooted community religion of such importance to the Irish national identity. Later, however, the country's growing modernization and the moral crisis caused by the sexual abuse scandals within the Catholic Church wiped out the political value of this association, and it became advisable to defend ayahuasca outside the religious model. The story does not end there, though. The growing repression of the components used in the potion, necessarily imported from South America, has led to the realization of ayahuasca cults – almost without ayahuasca. Centered now on another “root” practice, possession, the religion of Barquinha, in Brazil, had already shown the possibility of combining possession and visionary trance.

The chapter by Goldstein and Labate on the relations between contemporary art and ayahuasca, including the art inspired by the latter, may be the most complex. Just as Eduardo Viveiros de Castro argued in a famous text, that inconstancy was the one true constant of indigenous thought, here we could say that there is nothing more “Western” than contemporary art's passion to abolish all Western norms, dichotomies, and categories, starting with the category of art itself. Enough of contrasting author and public, artwork and everyday object, visual art and theatre, mastery and chance, conventions of beauty and ugliness. Contemporary art strives to overcome these limits, although unfortunately, it fails to show the same determination, or success, in relation to other traditional conditions of the art world; namely, the speculative environment of the market and the dubious world of patronage.

It is in these conditions that indigenous art, or the ayahuasca that served as its inspiration in so many cases, is convoked as an ally. This convocation is ambiguous, since it may be inspired both by the perception of indigenous productions as “art” and by the desire for symbolic demolition to which the new actor is invited to contribute. Of course, the demolition of Western categories is of no more interest to indigenous actors than the categories themselves, making their role somewhat dubious. Artists? Diacritics whose presence serves to enhance the iconoclastic value of an exhibition or performance? Authors or coauthors, duly recognized and remunerated as such? Exotic figurants? The authors note that these experiences of intercultural art frequently explicitly preclude the collaboration of anthropologists in



order to establish a purer relation, free of the colonial and academic vestiges of anthropology; although, this good intention may sometimes result in no more than a new staging of old plays that are always easier to applaud in the absence of critics.

Allow me to conclude with a couple of notes of concern that pervade the chapters of this book. The more somber is the observation that the forces that led to the War on Drugs – one of the most dismal legacies of the twentieth century – has not yet run its course, and, while the legalization or de-penalization of marijuana seems on the verge of acceptance, use of ayahuasca – which, for a long time, benefitted from a legal vacuum – is, little by little, being restricted.

It is worth noting that it is not now a question of a war *on* drugs but a war *between* drugs. The ideal of a life or a body without drugs was always an illusion; the use of drugs is as old as humankind, and strictly speaking, exceeds the limits of our species; but, it becomes completely hypocritical when announced in the middle of a system that makes massive use of psychotropic drugs from childhood. The real debate is not between the substances and their respective dangers, but between the agencies that control them: the subjects themselves, the networks in which they are embedded, the medical-pharmaceutical complex and its legal apparatus. It remains a paradox that public opinion still trusts the latter more than the former. Hobbs's chapter reveals the deafness of legislators to scientific works when it comes to ascertaining the danger posed by a substance: the sensationalist press, stirring up phantasms, has always been much more esteemed as an advisor. Perhaps this is because the fear of drugs, rather than being good for public health, is simply “good for banning,” for multiplying draconian laws that the state is incapable of enforcing, but maintains as a reserve of arbitrary power.

Another concern relates to the limitations of multiculturalism. Thirty years ago, when this current of thought became absorbed into legislative frameworks and public policies, it seemed a good way of dealing with the colonial legacy, balancing equality and differences. Thirty years later, everything is governed more than ever by a single criterion from one corner of the planet to the other, and what little remains of cultural difference falls into the hands of an active market of symbolic goods. The contemporary literature on ayahuasca, to which this book adds, conveys the malaise created by this pincer movement, contrasting with the sense of surprise felt years ago when the first steps in an unsuspected diaspora became perceptible. A more amenable vision can only come from this intuition, evident throughout a large part of the book's chapters, that we are dealing with new networks and objects, created from the clashes and equivocations of the colonial encounter, albeit not fated to perpetuate them forever.

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## 6 The global expansion of ayahuasca through the Internet

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### Introduction

The Internet has played a fundamental role in ayahuasca's global expansion. The capacity of the medium to facilitate information sharing, the development of social relationships and the mediation of cross-cultural discussion and exchange across vastly disparate geographical and cultural spaces has been critical to the intensity and diversity of the cultural re-invention of ayahuasca. Indeed, an immense variety of websites and social media platforms now abound with information, products, and active discussions pertaining to the psychoactive drink, enabling individuals to engage with and re-formulate the culture around the entheogen in progressively diversifying contemporary contexts. In order to properly understand the contemporary evolution of ayahuasca, it will be crucial to develop an appreciation of how the various online spaces are involved in contributing to ayahuasca's expansion beyond its traditional Amazonian homeland.

To date, a relatively limited amount of research has analyzed the relationship between ayahuasca and the Internet. As yet, there remains no attempt to provide a comprehensive overview of the scope of influence the Internet has had upon ayahuasca's global expansion. Nevertheless, a small number of studies have been performed. Christine Holman (2011) has conducted a "single site analysis" in her article, "Surfing for a Shaman: Analyzing an Ayahuasca Website," in which she examines the discursive motifs on the website of the ayahuasca retreat center, "Blue Morpho Tours." Two separate PhD dissertations that have assessed particular aspects of this relationship are also of note; Veronica Davidov (2008) performed an analysis of the discourse of tourist blogs and their role in the exoticization of ayahuasca and Amazonian culture, while John Heuser (2006) produced "A thematic analysis of Internet-reported encounters," in which he assesses and categorizes the array of encounters with "ayahuasca entities" that have been reported online. In light of the scant amount of academic analyses on this topic, the present chapter will attempt to provide a relatively comprehensive overview of the range of spaces in which ayahuasca is found online and the

various ways in which they operate and are being used to engage with and re-formulate ayahuasca culture.

The chapter begins with an analysis of the role of various social media platforms in the formation of online communities into which ayahuasca is incorporated and redefined within novel contexts. The unique ability to participate in discussion within social media spaces democratizes information flows, and allows minoritarian cultural groups to bypass legal and cultural barriers and acquire voice. However, the various social media sites and their associated communities each possess particular capacities for cultural development, tied to both site formats and community structures. In the following section, social media will be assessed in terms of its role in the re-invention of the Peruvian shamanic tradition of *vegetalismo*, which itself has a highly eclectic and transformable structure. Through discussions within social media communities, *vegetalismo* is incorporated into, and reassembled within, novel contexts. Individuals negotiate fluid notions of authenticity and value with regard to various features of *vegetalismo* and their relational constitution, thereby discursively redefining the structure and potential of the cultural tradition within the context of Western individualism.

The analysis will then involve an assessment of power relations and cultural representation online between Western and Amazonian cultures. The notable absence of Amazonian voices online within Western, English-speaking sites raises such issues, especially in terms of how Amazonian culture is being redefined outside of local Amazonian settings. Likewise, it is important to consider how Amazonians may harness the potential of the Internet to facilitate their own cultural emancipation, while recognizing the multi-directionality of cultural colonization. Continuing on, the integral role played by the Internet in the construction, promotion, and exchange of ayahuasca-based commodities will be examined. Ayahuasca's commodification online provides material access to the entheogen and related cultural products, such as books, DVDs, artworks, and the plants themselves, as well as contributing to its transformation through the formulation of valuable, consumable, cultural products.

The next section examines how information disseminated online has contributed to the emergence of the subculture of "psychonauts," such as that pertaining to ayahuasca analogues and home brewing practices. Through a variety of websites and social media platforms, both analogue and traditional recipes are discussed and shared, along with an emphasis upon secular, scientific understandings of the plants, extracts, and information related to health and the safety of such practices. Finally, the chapter ends with a discussion of how the relatively open access to information about ayahuasca, as well as the capacity to acquire psychoactive products, such as plants and extracts online, has important implications in terms of the potential for individuals to engage in unsafe practice as well as associated issues for regulatory bodies.

## **Social media and online ayahuasca communities**

Social media platforms play an intrinsic role in how ayahuasca culture expands into, and is re-invented, in novel contexts. The term “social media” is employed in this chapter to broadly refer to websites that, through web 2.0 interfaces, provide the ability for multiple individuals to contribute content through posting or commenting, whether that be through forums and blogs, news websites, video sharing platforms like YouTube, or the more ubiquitous social networks like Facebook (Fuchs, 2014; Thomas & Sheth, 2011). While information pertaining to ayahuasca has been widely disseminated on the Internet through the more conventional forms of news media, it has been the social media platforms that have enabled a leveling of hierarchies and a decentralization of information production through their capacity to support multi-directional interaction and the formation of niche sub-cultural communities as alternatives to macro cultural structures (Moyo, 2009). In this way, minor groups may acquire a voice and a degree of autonomy with which to escape dominant cultural and even legal structures, engendering a collective cultural expression that would normally otherwise be subject to such limitations in the offline world (Thomas & Sheth, 2011; Williams & Copes, 2005).

The emergence of certain cultural trends therefore, such as those associated with ayahuasca, is essentially related to this capacity provided by social media platforms to enable the formation of communities on the basis of shared interests, transcending geographical limitations and demographic and cultural differences (Bargh & McKenna, 2004). Conventional forms of news media have retained a degree of influence over the public perception of ayahuasca; however, online communities function to democratize information flows through decentralizing and diversifying the means of cultural production (Moyo, 2009).

The active discussion facilitated through social media spaces enables ayahuasca’s incorporation into, and re-invention within, modern Western frameworks, leading to the production of novel cultural constitutions. Users apply a mixture of Amazonian and Western concepts (including eclectic, New-Age-style cultural assemblages) through an engagement with topics such as bad trips, sorcery, health problems, or the selection and assessment of shamans and healing retreats, as well as other practical issues, such as brewing the tea, extraction techniques, and ayahuasca analogue compositions. Interaction within online ayahuasca communities therefore is commonly constituted in terms of ontology, practical efficacy, safety, and ethics. Specifically, the capacity to interact and to discuss issues allows individuals to acquire information, support, and advice that may be unavailable in offline settings due to the entheogen’s illegal and taboo status in most countries.

Importantly, however, the ways in which ayahuasca culture is produced online differ qualitatively between the various social media platforms and

their associated communities. The particular capacities and tendencies of a social media site, and therefore the scope and type of information and interaction produced therein are partly associated with its format and the composition of the community itself. For example, forums may differ between those tailored specifically to the topic of ayahuasca, and those based simply around relevant themes, such as Dimethyltryptamine (DMT), “drugs,” ethnobotany or shamanism. The site “Ayahuasca Forums” ([forums.ayahuasca.com](http://forums.ayahuasca.com)), for instance, a highly stratified platform, is structurally focused upon ayahuasca related themes, with sub-sections entitled “Shamanism,” “Ayahuasca Healing,” and “Plant Spirits,” as well as more Westernized themes of “Gaia,” “World Healing” and “Personal Health.” Conversely, the forum for the website [dmt-nexus.me](http://dmt-nexus.me) has a more general focus on the psychoactive molecule DMT, (the primary psychoactive component of the ayahuasca brew), with only a single section for ayahuasca as one of a variety of methods of ingesting DMT. Likewise, the forum “Shaman Australis” is structured with a specific focus upon ethnobotany, but also naturally includes extensive discussions pertaining to ayahuasca. Ayahuasca-based threads also appear on a range of other forums centered around themes of shamanism ([shamanportal.org/forum](http://shamanportal.org/forum)), psychonauts ([psychonaut.com/ayahuasca-dmt](http://psychonaut.com/ayahuasca-dmt)), and “drugs” ([drugs-forum.com/forum](http://drugs-forum.com/forum)).

Ayahuasca’s online expansion also takes place through other social media spaces, including mainstream social networks, such as Facebook groups; message boards, such as sub-Reddits; video sharing websites, like YouTube; and individual Wikis on the website Wikipedia. Sub-sections of each site can be created to harbor communities and discussions that center around specific topics. However, given the nature of such sites, members within these networks may be characteristically more transient, with the quality of interaction sustaining a greater superficiality. Reddit’s ayahuasca page ([reddit.com/r/ayahuasca](http://reddit.com/r/ayahuasca)) has a high frequency of posts; however, discussions are characteristically shorter, and often initiated by individuals asking for advice, and seeking simple information pertaining to ayahuasca tourism and safety concerns. The video sharing website YouTube provides individuals and groups with the opportunity to produce visual and audible cultural material related to ayahuasca. The composition of communities on this site are affected by, for instance, YouTube’s site structure, which enables individuals to easily encounter video content pertaining to ayahuasca through video suggestions, as well as create “channels” and video content and subsequently to attract “subscribers.” However, interaction through “commenting” on videos remains a highly unstructured practice on the site within the community context.

In a similar fashion, Facebook groups dedicated to ayahuasca, the largest of which is a group called “Ayahuasca,” with 69, 255 members ([www.facebook.com/groups/ayahuascaworld](http://www.facebook.com/groups/ayahuascaworld)), provide opportunities for members to seek information and connect with others who share an interest in ayahuasca and related topics. Facebook’s structural apparatus and social

norms also influence how a community engages with ayahuasca. For example, members are able to promote ayahuasca-related events, and the sharing of Internet memes is a common format of interaction within both Facebook and in the associated ayahuasca groups. Finally, through its role as an online encyclopedia, Wikipedia remains an immensely influential source of information on the topic, appearing first in Google search (as of January 10, 2017). The ability for members to be able to edit a page over time allows for a fluidly evolving body of material on ayahuasca; this database is essentially reliant upon the site functioning as an active online community.

Of course, the various social media platforms simply provide a spatial apparatus through which cultural flows may pass and converge. The ideas and experiences brought to discussions within online social networks are partly tied to offline contexts and embodied encounters with ayahuasca and related cultural trends. However, the advent of web 2.0 and the growth of social media provide individuals with the capacity to not only access but also to actively produce a wider scope of information and perspectives through active discussion. Importantly, this capacity for multi-directional discussion supports an individualistic approach towards cultural construction and practice, essentially contributing to the reformulation of ayahuasca within Western neo-liberal contexts. The range of sites through which one may engage with ayahuasca culture provide a plethora of options in terms of communities and interactional structures, which contributes to engendering a wider scope of individual choice, and thus cultural re-invention.

### **Social media and the re-invention of vegetalismo**

Social media platforms and the associated online communities provide the capacity for users to discuss and negotiate ideas that lead to the co-invention of novel cultural forms (Bargh & McKenna, 2004; Williams & Copes, 2005). Due to its inherent capacity for re-formulation and adaption to novel contexts, Peruvian vegetalismo is being re-imagined and re-invented (Labate, 2014; Tupper, 2008; 2009) within neo-liberal individualistic contexts through collective discussion and the active negotiation of ideas online. Social media spaces thereby allow vegetalismo to be re-constructed within novel cultural assemblages that are forged through the negotiated incorporation of Western discourse and traditional or pre-existent features. The components of vegetalismo's cultural assemblage are negotiated through discussions and debates, and the sharing of advice and support regarding ethics, efficacy, and ontology. For the sake of coherency within the limits of this chapter, the present section will assess the relationship between vegetalismo and social media through an analysis of a specific social media space known as the "Ayahuasca Forums" ([forums.ayahuasca.com](http://forums.ayahuasca.com)). The Ayahuasca Forums is the largest and most prominent social media space dedicated to the topic of ayahuasca. Currently, the forum has a total of 20,324 members, with 284,928 posts from 29,474 topics or threads (as of January 10, 2017).

Vegetalismo has played a major role in the expansion of ayahuasca beyond the Amazon (Labate, 2014; Tupper, 2008). Vegetalismo is a form of shamanism and ayahuasca practice derived from Peruvian mestizo traditions (Beyer, 2009; Luna, 1986, 2011). Characteristics commonly considered to be central to the cultural tradition include the use of the ayahuasca vine and other specific plants by a shaman in order to facilitate healing, as well as the practice of dieting, the animistic belief in spirit beings, and the use of tobacco, singing, and other ritual tools in shamanic ceremonies (Labate, 2014; Luna, 1984, 1986, 2011). It has a highly eclectic and malleable structure that varies and, indeed, has actively evolved between cultural contexts (Labate, 2014; Tupper, 2008, 2009) through a syncretic amalgamation of various cultural practices and beliefs (Andritzky, 1989; Dobkin de Rios, 1984, 1989; Kamppinen, 1988). Social media sites constitute novel environments within which individuals and communities are able to engage with vegetalismo discursively and thereby concurrently channel cultural flows into radically alternate contexts of embodied practice (which thereby feed back into online spaces).

Various features of vegetalismo may be incorporated into an individual's fluctuating cultural assemblage. Online, such features are appropriated and positioned within a Western framework of meaning and value, whereby signifiers that complement Western cultural narratives are adapted to satisfy individual contexts, producing a syncretic assemblage of spiritual, ontological and health beliefs (Gearin, 2015; Labate, 2014; Tupper, 2008, 2009; York, 2001). This process of amalgamation may include ontological systems involving the existence and behavior of spirit beings and other supernatural forces, notions of efficacy related to styles and techniques of practice, such as healing, dieting, and various ritual features, and ethical concerns, associated with, for instance, the practice of sorcery, sexual abuse by shamans, cultural commodification, and the appropriation of indigenous culture. Discussions that take place within social media sites inevitably contribute to a broader negotiation of the authenticity and value of particular configurations of such features, resulting in a variety of new formulations, mixtures and standardizations of the tradition.

One aspect often considered fundamental to traditional vegetalismo shamanism is the practice of healing through the use of ayahuasca by the shaman (Beyer, 2009; Luna, 1986, 2011). The central importance of healing within these practices, as well as other elements, such as the use of ayahuasca and the role of the shaman, has been questioned (Echazú and Carew, in this volume). However, this section seeks to demonstrate the widespread prioritization of such features by primarily Western practitioners who post online. The Ayahuasca Forums are explicitly organized through the use of sub-sections, such as that entitled "Ayahuasca Healing," which direct discussions on this theme, with threads such as, "Healing process with ayahuasca" (Oblak, 2011, September 8) and "What is healing?" (Cyrus, 2009, July 2). While demonstrating both the popularity and relevance of

this theme, the structuring of a forum section around a topic like healing plays an active role in its production and standardization. The notion of ayahuasca healing is also positioned within a Western framework, with the incorporation of Western notions of illness. Such themes often appear in the form of requests for information, advice, and support, with individuals seeking ayahuasca specifically as a healing mechanism, and as an alternative to Western traditions. For example, on the Ayahuasca Forums one can find threads like, “doing ayahuasca alone for severe social anxiety,” “Treating schizophrenia” (Peke, 2015, April 7), “Ayahuasca and cancer” (Anandaniel, 2011, September 14), and “my OCD and ayahuasca” (Nhlchrst, 2015, February 19). Here, it is evident how, through this online space, the prominence of healing in vegetalismo is being isolated, appropriated, and re-invented to cater to Western health conditions or problems.

Vegetalismo is also subject to a process of traditionalization as specific features are isolated and reproduced due to their perceived “authenticity,” albeit in a form radically decontextualized from local Amazonian settings. For instance, the veracity and ethical value of ontological features, such as the activity of spiritual beings and forces, is commonly discussed. Themes pertaining to “plant spirits” and related practices, such as dieting with plants, are a common topic of discussion. The sections titled “Plant Spirits” and “Shamanism,” for example, contains threads relating to ontological notions within vegetalismo practice, such as, “plant sentience as seen through shamanic Amazonian worldview” (Sachahambi, 2007, February 11) and “do spirits exist?” (Plantman101, 2015, August 20). The ontological reality and ethical value of “traditionalized” supernatural themes are also discussed in relation to sorcery or *brujeria*. Debates pertaining to the activity of sorcerers, witches, or malevolent shamans, such as “understanding brujeria” (Metamorphosis, 2013, January 23) and “when brujos attack” (Michael@mishkitaki, 2011, March 7)), often involve some forum members strongly opposing or even ridiculing the ontological notion of spiritual or magical attacks, with others arguing that such phenomena can only be properly understood from the point of view of local Amazonian culture. An engagement with such themes online not only involves a decontextualization of Amazonian culture, but also a colonization of the West with ostensibly Amazonian concepts (Labate, 2014).

Specific techniques of practice are also included in conversations as individuals seek to develop understandings or express their own opinions regarding authentic practices. For example, *dietas*, or traditional diets that are employed in shamanic training and healing, are common topics in threads. On the Ayahuasca Forums, the thread “Dieta and the plant world’ (Sachahambi, 2005, March 30) provides an extensive body of information on Amazonian concepts. The concept of the diet is also blended with modern scientific ideas, demonstrated by threads titled “Foods and meds to avoid with MAOIs” (Admin, 2007, May 31) and “Betacarbolines & MAOI: Fact, Fiction and Mystery” (Tregar, 2006, November 5). The incorporation of



Western, scientific discourse into understandings of dieting as a shamanic practice contributes to a “scientization” of *vegetalismo*; that is, the incorporation of scientific language, concepts, and techniques into *vegetalismo* practice (Labate, 2014). While altering the shamanic system itself, this process also serves to make the system more accessible and even more authentic for certain individuals.

Social media discussions will also often involve a collective analysis of the role of the shaman as a trained guide and healer, an essential feature of traditional *vegetalismo* contexts. Members of the Ayahuasca Forums debate the constitution of shamanic authenticity, and even the very need for a shaman itself. The forum also operates as a space within which individuals can seek advice and recommendations for shamans, especially in the context of ayahuasca tourism. Indeed, the initial emergence of the phenomenon of ayahuasca tourism in the mid to late 1990s coincides temporally with the worldwide expansion of the Internet (Homan, 2017). Members may also debate the constitution of ethical practice in relation to shamanism, as well as making accusations and distributing warnings about particular shamans who are said to have abused clients. Forums thereby become zones within which the wider community can be warned of dangerous or unscrupulous practitioners and where victims can seek support.

Importantly, the negotiation of these kinds of issues necessarily involves a Westernization of shamanic practice, as individuals impose Western standards upon a shamanic system derived from Amazonian cultural settings. From the Ayahuasca Forums, “Sachahambi” states: “A healer having sexual contact with people he is supposed to be healing is sexual abuse by definition. Even more so, when a powerful mind-altering substance is involved” (Sachahambi, 2013, March 3). Likewise, alternative ideas are introduced into Western frameworks of spirituality and healthcare, such as the acceptability of touching in the practice of shamanic healing, as is evident in the statement by the member “Mondude”: “The requirement of a shaman . . . [is to] to touch his patients on an intimate level, because to truly heal a shaman has to get truly close to you. That’s where Western methods of healing the psyche and spirit fall short” (Mondude, 2013, March 17). In this way, social media spaces allow communities to collectively process and negotiate issues as they emerge in these novel cultural contexts, thus contributing to *vegetalismo*’s ongoing expansion and re-invention.

### **Cultural representation and the digital divide**

The appropriation of Amazonian culture through online spaces may negatively impact technologically marginalized groups who lack voice, and the capacity to produce culture online. Distinct inequalities exist between different ethnic, cultural, and demographic groups throughout the globe, in terms of those with access to the technology and the skills required to take part in the online sphere (Moyo, 2009), a phenomenon referred to as

the “digital divide” (Moyo, 2009; Murelli, 2002). In the context of ayahuasca’s cross-cultural expansion, Amazonian peoples are often subject to such disadvantages (Holman, 2011; Tupper, 2009), economically, culturally, and linguistically. The absence of Amazonian voices from English language websites (Fotiou, 2014) alone wrests a degree of cultural autonomy from those for whom ayahuasca and related shamanic systems remain important culturally, spiritually, and medically. However, it is also important to assess the ways in which power and cultural production in online spaces are harnessed and distributed cross-culturally through a multi-directional understanding of cultural dissemination (Appadurai, 1986) in order to appreciate the broader complexity of the process.

Disparities in online presence, due to a lack of technological access and cultural and linguistic capacity, render much of the Amazonian voice silent in the active negotiation of their cultural traditions. English language social media spaces and websites used in the production and promotion of commodities, for instance, are predominantly Western networks in which vegetalismo and indigenous traditions are incorporated into, and re-invented by and for, Western actors. Consequently, notions of value and authenticity are being determined by flows, networks, and actors exterior to local Amazonian settings, as Amazonian culture is incorporated into Western individualistic and consumer contexts within online spaces. Ironically, such a dynamic contributes to the production of reified generalities (Iseke-Barnes, 2007), subsequently influencing the material evolution of cultural systems. Critics have drawn attention to the construction and promotion of Amazonian culture as an ahistorical entity through the use of exotic archetypes such as the “noble savage” to attract a Western clientele (Davidov, 2010; Holman, 2011).

Conversely, however, the Internet has the potential to bring about political, cultural, and economic emancipation (Appadurai, 1986; Labate, 2014; Tupper, 2009) and has been employed by marginalized groups as a way to reconnect with dominant cultural structures (Tupper, 2008), and facilitate autonomous cultural development. Digital technologies can be employed for the task of sustaining, reproducing, and re-inventing indigenous culture (Iseke-Barnes, 2007), as well as for economic and political advantage. In this sense, online spaces do have the capacity to enable Amazonians to reveal particular issues to a wider public audience, as well as to make connections with one another, assisting the development of novel solutions to common problems (Tupper, 2009).

The Internet’s role as a force of globalization is directly associated with its capacity to enable multi-directional cultural dissemination. This capacity is reduced through the mechanisms detailed above; however, while necessarily involving the appropriation of Amazonian traditions, ayahuasca’s global expansion has also contributed to a reverse colonization of the West, as Amazonian shamanic cultural tropes are adopted within Western spaces (Labate, 2014). Concurrently, Western practices are eventually re-directed

back into local Amazonian contexts, especially within tourist settings (Fotiou, 2010, 2014). Furthermore, the appropriation and re-invention of Amazonian culture through information sharing online is contiguous in general with how traditions of ayahuasca shamanism, such as *vegetalismo*, have evolved through the colonial period and into the current globalized situation (Gow, 1994; Taussig, 1987, 1993). Simplistic unilinear notions of colonialism and cultural ownership obscure an appreciation of the active and dynamic scenario unfolding online. It is, rather, crucial to consider the relative degree of empowerment in terms of technological access and the ability and motivation of marginalized groups to engage in the potential of this space to facilitate positive cultural development, as well as the tendencies of particular spaces and communities to generate notions of Amazonian culture that may be limiting in ways detrimental to cultural well-being.

### **Ayahuasca commodities online**

The invention, production, and dissemination of ayahuasca-related commodities through the Internet has been integral to ayahuasca's global expansion. Websites promoting artworks, books, cultural artifacts, touristic products, and even the plants themselves are a prevalent feature of ayahuasca's online culture (Homan, 2017; Peluso, 2017). The ability to promote and exchange commodities online specifically enhances the material accessibility of ayahuasca and the array of associated cultural products. Through its commodification online, ayahuasca is reformulated within and through the realm of neo-liberal consumerism. As commodities are produced to cater to an assemblage of Western desires, ayahuasca culture is reinvented, in turn affecting how individuals relate to, and therefore engage with, the cultural products. While the construction and dissemination of ayahuasca commodities can play an intrinsic role in emancipating marginalized sub-cultures, cultural commodification also significantly affects the dynamic of online spaces, re-hierarchizing social relations, standardizing cultural forms, and potentially undermining the democratization of cultural production in the digital sphere.

The commodification of culture necessitates its reformulation for a generalized consumer base (Rindfleish, 2005; York, 2001). Features of the Amazonian cultural and shamanic system in general are reproduced and re-contextualized to cater to a predominantly Western consumer market (Fotiou, 2010, 2014; Holman, 2010; Labate, 2014). In the online sphere, ayahuasca-related products are therefore produced to cater to a de-territorialized consumer market, in which traditional features of the Amazonian shamanic culture are incorporated into a Western cultural framework. In particular, the highly recognizable and reproducible structure of *vegetalismo* allows for certain features to be reformulated, reproduced, and promoted online in commodity form. On the Internet, ayahuasca-based products are generally targeted towards, and consumed by, those within subcultural groups that

value notions of “authentic” shamanic traditions, as well as modern, Western conceptions of spirituality and health.

Visionary and Amazonian artworks which draw upon visual tropes of the ayahuasca experience and shamanic culture more generally are some of the most commonly advertised products online. For instance, paintings and prints by well-known artists, such as Anderson Debernardi ([www.debernardivision.com](http://www.debernardivision.com)), and of the now-deceased indigenous painter and shaman Pablo Amaringo ([www.ayahuascavisions.com](http://www.ayahuascavisions.com)), are promoted as authentic representations of Amazonian shamanic culture. The websites display colorful and complexly rendered patterns, visionary tropes, scenes of shamanic practice, and other features of Amazonian culture. Prints of artworks are also sold through more general websites selling a variety of products not restricted to ayahuasca (see <http://fineartamerica.com/art/paintings/ayahuasca>), thus demonstrating the value and scope of such products, and the market as a whole.

An enormous variety of ayahuasca-related books can also be found online. Simply searching for the term “ayahuasca” on a search engine like Google produces thousands of links to online stores like eBay, Amazon, and Book Depository. A variety of books can be found tailored to both academic and lay readerships; however, thematically, the vast majority pertains to a discussion of Amazonian shamanic culture. Commodities related to Amazonian culture and ayahuasca shamanism are produced and promoted, as are audio recordings of *icaros* (e.g., Google Play) and DVDs of documentary films (e.g., [www.shamansoftheamazon.com/sales.htm](http://www.shamansoftheamazon.com/sales.htm)). Clothing designed through the appropriation of indigenous patterned artworks, especially that of the Peruvian Shipibo, can also be found on a number of websites among a range of other psychedelic and counterculture-themed clothing items (e.g., Etsy.com, Redbubble.com, and Zazzle.com).

One of the most commonly promoted products associated with ayahuasca on the Internet are ayahuasca retreat centers. There is no question that the booming ayahuasca tourism trade would not have developed as quickly or as extensively as it has without both the ability to engage in online discussion, and the opportunity for businesses to promote and sell their products online (Fotiou, 2014). Today, the Internet remains the primary, and often only, mechanism through which ayahuasca retreats are promoted, and where shamanic practitioners and retreat operators within the industry are able to promote their service to a global clientele. Promotion websites therefore play a powerful role in how ayahuasca and related cultural practices are discursively constructed as “authentic,” and therefore valuable, commodities (Davidov, 2010; Holman, 2010). Videos, images, and text are used to accentuate traditional features of the shamanic practice, as well as the aptitude of shamans, who are often displayed in traditional garments and referred to as “masters” with connections to “ancient lineages.”

The Internet also operates as a space within which consumers are able to review products and acquire advice about the quality and value of particular

ayahuasca commodities. Social media platforms, especially forums, message boards, and specifically tailored review websites, like [www.ayaadvisors.org](http://www.ayaadvisors.org), provide the opportunity for individuals to discuss their experiences with the various products and services (Peluso, 2017). Over time, a number of shamans and retreats have come to depend upon the reviews of tourists, who, through online spaces, essentially negotiate relative constitutions of authenticity and value. For instance, the websites [www.ayaadvisors.org](http://www.ayaadvisors.org) and [www.tripadvisor.com](http://www.tripadvisor.com) are the first and second search results that appear in the Google search “ayahuasca retreat review” (as of January 10, 2017). On websites like [ayaadvisors.org](http://ayaadvisors.org), retreat operators can post their business in an online space designed specifically to enable consumers to peruse and review healing centers, as well as to detail their experiences and review particular shamans and retreats.

The Internet also provides an opportunity to purchase the plants and extracts from plants used in both traditional and analogous ayahuasca brews (Peluso, 2014, 2017; Tupper, 2017). As Tupper (2008) has recognized, many websites sell “live cuttings or dried samples of *B. caapi*, *P. viridis* and numerous other plants, such as *Mimosa hostilis* and *Peganum harmala*” (Tupper, 2008, p. 299). A variety of options exist in this regard. For instance, the website [shamanic-extracts.com](http://shamanic-extracts.com) sells a range of extracts for ayahuasca analogues, while the website [botanic-art.com](http://botanic-art.com), sells bulk substances “business-to-business only.” The website [www.soul-herbs.com](http://www.soul-herbs.com) provides direct access to what is referred to as an “ayahuasca kit,” with “ayahuasca *Banisteriopsis Caapi* resin and *Mimosa Hostilis* resin,” which can be converted into the ayahuasca drink and is mailed “to any country in the world” at prices ranging between \$197 and \$397, dependent upon amount ([www.soul-herbs.com/product/ayahuasca-kits/](http://www.soul-herbs.com/product/ayahuasca-kits/)). Interestingly, it is argued on this page that it is both expensive and not necessary to travel to do ayahuasca with a shaman, specifically drawing attention to the value of their own product. The sale of illicit psychoactive substances on the Internet is a growing phenomenon that reflects the potential of the online sphere to subvert cultural and legal restrictions, and foster the emergence of sub-cultural movements, such as that associated with ayahuasca. The phenomenon also presents genuine problems for authorities worldwide, especially in regard to the potential for any negative health consequences of misuse (Halpern & Pope, 2001; Walsh, 2011).

The exchange of ideas and opinions through social media serves to actively incorporate ayahuasca and Amazonian culture into contexts of Western individualism, facilitating a degree of democratization and a flattening of discursive cultural production. Conversely, cultural commodification contributes to a stratification and formalization of culture. Producers seek to convert products from their alternative, singular emergence into generalized, reproducible formats that essentially undermine the democratic potential of online cultural production (Papacharissi, 2009). Again, it is important to consider how particular online spaces facilitate the promotion

and exchange of ayahuasca commodities and the implications of this process for the equality of cultural production.

### **Psychonauts and analogues**

The Internet has played an important role in facilitating the development of psychonautic ayahuasca practice and the related use of ayahuasca analogues. Principally, this takes place through the sharing of information pertaining to analogues, recipes, and brewing techniques, as well as the exchange of plants and extracts. These largely individualistic and secular themes and practices have likely contributed to the expansion of the psychoactive drink, especially in terms of its global accessibility. Analogues and home brewing practices generally form part of the sub-culture of “psychonauts,” an individualistic and distinctly secular grouping distinct from the forms of traditionalization evident in the appropriation of vegetalismo. In psychonautic practice, and through the use of analogues, ayahuasca is dislocated from traditional cultural moorings and incorporated into non-traditional contexts through the application of the scientific language of molecular compositions, chemical interactions, and physiological effects. The dissemination of scientific data through online archives, as well as the use of scientific language in the development of novel concepts, and the sharing of opinions and experiences through active discussions on social media, contributes to the re-formulation of ayahuasca’s cultural relationships. These alternative discursive relationships, and the direct access to plants and extracts achieved through online spaces, provide opportunities for individuals to engage with ayahuasca in a range of novel contexts.

In contrast to the appropriation and reinvention of vegetalismo, online information sharing and discussions pertaining to ayahuasca analogues and brewing techniques are generally set within secular psychonautic contexts. “Psychonauts” can be defined as individuals who use psychoactive substances “without adherence to any traditional or formalized ritual protocols” (Tupper, 2011, p. 12). Psychonautic practice is characterized by a secularized focus on pharmacological and ethnobotanical understandings of the plants, devoid of any specifically spiritual or traditional grounding in terms of beliefs or practice. The discursive contextualization of ayahuasca within scientific language through websites and books shared online provide individuals with an avenue to engage with the field in a modern, Western language. The employment of scientific language online standardizes ayahuasca’s cultural grounding in ways that serve to broaden its accessibility within modern Western culture (Labate, 2014), such as through establishing safe and effective dosages and other features common to the practice.

The capacity to share information and negotiate novel concepts online has significantly contributed to layperson understandings of ayahuasca analogues, while the growth of interest in analogues itself has been a major contributor to ayahuasca’s worldwide expansion (Tupper, 2008). Ayahuasca

analogues are plants that contain the particular psychoactive molecular properties found in the Amazonian plants used in ayahuasca brews and can therefore be employed as alternatives to those used in traditional contexts (Ott, 1994; Tupper, 2008). Consequently, in modern settings outside of the Amazon, alternatives to the traditional constituents are now employed to achieve the same, or similar, effects as ayahuasca.

Throughout the Internet, scientific information pertaining to the concept of analogues, as well as the various plant types and brewing techniques, is relatively easy to obtain. Online spaces, whether social media or otherwise, generally function as information archives (Thomas & Sheth, 2011), as well as avenues through which information can be purchased. PDF versions of books are free to access, such as *Ayahuasca Analogues and Plant Based Tryptamines* (DeKorne, Aardvark & Trout, 2000) ([www.erowid.org](http://www.erowid.org)), while others, such as *Ayahuasca Analogues: Pangean Entheogens* (Ott, 1994), are available for purchase through online stores (Amazon.com). It is also possible to access information from books reproduced online through websites like [www.serendipity.li/dmt/hoasca.html](http://www.serendipity.li/dmt/hoasca.html) and [www.erowid.org](http://www.erowid.org). This kind of data carries a certain degree of authority, being derived from foundational academic studies, and books that have become widely known throughout ethnobotanical, psychedelic, and academic circles.

Through such avenues, it is also possible to obtain practical information pertaining to brewing techniques and “recipes.” For instance, the website [erowid.org](http://erowid.org) contains a page which lists 12 different examples of analogue “recipes,” a list of “plants that contain MAO-Inhibiting  $\beta$ -Carbolines and may be useful for ayahuasca analogs,” and a list of “plants that contain DMT and may be used for making ayahuasca analogs” (Erowid, 2005). Certain forums are particularly suited to topics related to brewing techniques and the use of analogues, such as those structured around subjects relating to pharmacology and ethnobotany. Members of such communities also participate in active discussion, responding to questions and providing advice. For example, threads such as “plants used in ayahuasca and analogue brews,” on the Ayahuasca Forums; sections of the DMT-Nexus.com forum entitled “Preparations and Methods of Administration,” with sub-sections for ayahuasca and pharmahuasca (i.e., analogue versions of ayahuasca); and the thread “novel ayahuasca analogues- just add yours!” on Shaman-Australis.com forum (a forum that has a general emphasis upon ethnobotany). Video sharing websites like YouTube also provide the opportunity to present visual demonstrations of brewing techniques, with videos like “How to Make Ayahuasca” (JustDontFall, 2014) and “How to Capsule Ayahuasca, its CHEAP and EASY!” (Ayahuasca, 2015).

Individuals may choose to use these kinds of threads either as readily accessible, fluidly evolving archives of practical information, or as spaces of active discussion (Thomas & Sheth, 2011). The recontextualization of ayahuasca use also takes place through the sharing of experiences and the active, ongoing negotiation of ideas and systems of practice facilitated

through social media platforms. Online discussions commonly involve requests for advice as well as descriptions of one's own experiments. Individuals detail the types of plants used, their relative chemical properties, and quantities used in brews. On the message board [Reddit.com/r/ayahuasca](https://www.reddit.com/r/ayahuasca/), for instance, the majority of threads, in fact, pertain to the more secular subjects of plant mixtures, analogues, brewing, and health and safety. Most such threads are originally posted by individuals seeking advice, which may be partly associated with the relatively open, transient community structure, populated by "weak ties" (Bennet & Toft, 2009). Because the sub-Reddit's structure and community etiquette are less cohesive, a higher frequency of superficial questions may be permitted. "Trip reports," or descriptions of one's experiences using ayahuasca analogues and home brews, are also commonly found on forums and other websites, such as Erowid. Trip reports are likely to detail any positive or negative physiological or psychological outcomes from the psychonautic experimentation (Halpern & Pope, 2001), with discourse commonly involving psychological, chemical, and other scientific terminology and conceptual bases.

Finally, as has been discussed above, the Internet provides individuals with the opportunity to purchase, share, and exchange a wide variety of plants and extracts. This capacity has been critical to the broadening accessibility of ayahuasca and its adoption within novel cultural contexts of practice. Specifically, the acquisition of ayahuasca brews, plant extracts, and analogues affords individuals the ability to transmit information acquired from the Internet into embodied practice in secular, individualistic contexts. Importantly, the lack of regulation pertaining to how information and products are disseminated online raises the issue of the potential health risks of the spread of misinformation and unsafe practice.

## **Health and regulation**

The experimentation with psychoactive substances, their introduction into novel contexts of use, and the relatively unregulated dissemination of (mis) information inevitably involves health risks. Indeed, some amateur psychonauts "have harmed themselves through experimenting with ayahuasca analogues in recreational contexts" (Tupper, 2008, p. 299), while others have encountered problems in the context of touristic practice in the Amazon due to a lack of prior research, or misrepresentations online. Currently, however, "reported adverse outcomes" of ayahuasca use remain "extremely rare"; those instances of harm being associated with previous health conditions and "non-traditional preparations" (Tupper, 2008, p. 299). Participants also have the potential to harm themselves through failing to properly understand the effects and having insufficient support during and after the experience.

It is yet unclear whether access to information about drugs contributes to their increased usage and associated health concerns. Some argue, for



instance, that websites that function as archives of drug-related information (such as [www.lycaem.org](http://www.lycaem.org) and [www.erowid.org](http://www.erowid.org)) encourage or enable misuse. It has been argued that “partisan” websites provide a space for the accumulation of misinformation, while there is a limited discussion of risks (Brush, Bird & Boyer, 2004). Certain websites, however, such as Erowid, make explicit mention of health risks with the intention of raising awareness (Langlitz, 2009; Walsh, 2011) and function partly in response to the health risks associated with a widespread culture of illicit use of psychoactives (Langlitz, 2009), and the lack of relevant, publicly available information.

Moreover, the capacity for ayahuasca to affect various kinds of healing and spiritual or religiously meaningful experiences in safe contexts are well documented in academic literature (Dobkin de Rios, 1984, 1989; Fotiou, 2010, 2014; Winkleman, 2005). Safe practice, therefore, is heavily dependent upon the kind of information people have at their disposal and the kind of cultural and communal habits and protocols that exist. Online communities and other websites play an important role in reducing potential risks of drug taking through the sharing of ideas pertaining to safe modes of practice, regulating misinformation (Walsh, 2011), and providing support for individuals to be able to integrate psychologically challenging experiences.

Ayahuasca’s global expansion is itself a challenging scenario for governments and policy makers (Tupper, 2009), a situation intrinsically associated with the growth in information technologies. The enormous and unprecedented scope of information made freely available on the Internet (Thomas & Sheth, 2011) makes restricting or regulating access now more difficult than has ever historically been the case. At the same time, controls upon Internet activity are increasing, with governments throughout the globe progressively introducing policies of greater regulation, surveillance, and content filtering (Deibert, 2009). Policy makers must contend with the issue of finding a balance between the advantages of minimizing the potential scope of information that may lead to harmful consequences through regulation and education and the disadvantages of limiting the creative and emancipatory potential of Internet-based information exchange (Tupper, 2009).

## **Conclusion**

There is no doubt that ayahuasca’s ongoing global expansion is fundamentally tied to its presence on the Internet. The democratization of information flows online has enabled a plethora of new avenues through which ayahuasca can be embraced. The ability to share information, interact, and form communities across immense geographical and cultural distances has given life and voice to peripheral subcultures and minority groups and provided the potential for discursive cultural re-invention, such as with *vegetalismo*, psychonautic practice, analogue use, and the construction and dissemination of commodities online. Moreover, the multi-directional nature of cultural dissemination means that online spaces have the potential

to facilitate cultural revival and autonomous production as marginalized groups progressively develop more of an online, cross-cultural, and even globalized presence.

There are, however, particular issues that arise in relation to ayahuasca's online presence. The ability to influence or even control cultural production, both discursively and through the promotion and dissemination of commodities, is a powerful force, re-embedding ayahuasca and associated cultural structures within neoliberal power relations. Furthermore, the lack of restrictions upon information sharing and product exchange, while diversifying voices, perspectives, and opportunities, can also contribute to a proliferation of misinformation and associated potential health issues related to unsafe practice. The Internet is a rapidly and constantly changing social and cultural environment, within which community structures and cultural production are likely to transform significantly over time. It will be important to examine how websites and social media platforms continue to be used to engage with, and re-invent, ayahuasca culture, while paying close attention to the friction and interplay between the agency of online spaces and the embodied practices of the offline world.

## Note

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